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ABSTRACT

The symbolic rather than the behavioral aspects of leadership are key factors. Research that indicates leaders make little difference to organizational effectiveness has paid too much attention to instrumental and behavioral aspects of leadership and not enough to symbolic and cultural aspects. Schools are not naturally rigid, as is thought, but rather are adaptive and discover or infer their goals from the direction they take. The problem of identifying leadership in schools comes from this limited view of the concept, which is too concerned with such leadership "facts" as objectives, behavior, outcomes, and measurable effectiveness. The substance of leadership actually deals mostly with social meanings in an organization's culture. The chief aspects of such symbolic leadership include leadership selectivity, meaning communicating priorities by managing the attention the leader pays to different things; leadership consciousness, involving the leader's espousing and modelling of purposes, standards, and beliefs; and leadership fidelity, involving the building of staff loyalty to organizational norms and aspirations. All these aspects of symbolic leadership help build "organizational patriotism" and improve organizational performance. (RW)

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SYMBOLISM IN LEADERSHIP

(What Great Leaders Know That Ordinary Ones Do Not)

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I begin these comments on the topic of leadership with the ending. This may seem strange initially since it seems to violate normal logical discourse but by concluding first and then working my way back to the beginning I symbolize the present state of leadership and leadership theory. Contrary to what we think we know about leadership; it is really more shadow than substance, more inferential than factual, more intangible than tangible, more subjective than objective, more cultural than behavioral and indeed, more akin to social meanings than social facts.

To simply matters one ending should be sufficient but leadership is not a simple matter and therefore I have several endings. Let me share with you an additional ending by concluding that Warren Bennis was right when he noted that "of all the hazy and confounding areas in social psychology, leadership theory undoubtedly contends for top nomination. And ironically, probably more has been written and less is known about leadership than any other topic in the behavioral sciences." (Bennis, 1959).

A final conclusion I reach is that it is the symbolic aspects of leadership which are key, not leadership behavior or style. It is possession of this knowledge which marks the difference between more and less effective leaders.

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Leadership theory is in a state of despair and retreat at the moment. The most recent and most influential writers on this topic conclude that leaders simply do not make much difference on the effectiveness of an organisation (Cohen and March, 1974). The argument is persuasive and based on empirical evidence which suggests that the activity of leadership is both dull and mundane. This research suggests that leaders themselves are fairly interchangeable with (assuming equal competence among them) no one making a more greater impact on the organisation than any other.(March, 1980). This latter finding suggests that it is the maintenance aspects of leadership which comprises the bulk of leadership activity. Further, no link, beyond providing for the necessary maintenance function, can be found between leadership activity and organisational effectiveness. I do not doubt these findings but consider interpretations of this research to be a bit one sided. Missing is a behind the scenes analysis of the more informal aspects of leadership and the more subtle effects of the leader. Too much attention has been given in both leadership theory and practice to the instrumental and behavioral aspects of leadership and not enough to the symbolic and cultural aspects. The real action for leadership is in the testing of common assumptions, in the creation and nurturing of standards, traditions, and beliefs, and in the establishing and supporting of a school culture which governs behavior. This is a behind the scenes activity, an informal activity where messages and images, beliefs and values, and behavior modelling may be more important than leadership behavior in its more mechanical and overt sense. What the

leader stands for and the ability of the leader to communicate this standard by thought and word may well be more important than what the leader does or how he or she behaves.

It is typically assumed, for example, that schools are rigid and that changes occur by careful planning and action from those at the top. According to this view ill-conceived or uninspiring leadership from the top results in resistance to change. It is good leadership, we are told, that facilitates change and it is bad leadership that generates resistance to change. Without good leadership change does not occur because organisations are naturally rigid.

Are schools naturally rigid? The answer is probably not. The usual indicators that schools are resistant to change may actually be indicators of their adaptability. One could, for example, characterise the cleverness and ingenuity with which teachers and teaching departments in technical and high schools distort and subvert administrative directions to suit their own ends as disfunctional and as signs of rigidity. But one could also view this behavior as functional and as signs of adaptability. We are beginning to realise that changes occur as serendipitous by-products of the normal efforts of individuals within organisations to maintain and extend their way of life, their culture. Direct and overt leadership from the top can alter structures and labels but rarely sentiments, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

Sensitive leaders have a nose for detecting emerging changes in organisations. The changes are typically grass roots in origin, fairly incremental as oppcsed to parts of grand schemes, and represent either attempts of teachers to maintain and extend their culture or attempts to modify this culture in response to external necessities. Having sensed the shape and scope of this change, the leader labels it, structures it more formally, and with banner held high, assumes the post position. By this symbolic act, the change becomes formal and legitimate and the leader is considered effective.

My account of organisational adaptability and the serendipitous nature of organisational goals and directions lends doubt to the second widely held truth about organisational life - that leaders set goals and objectives, carefully weigh alternative strategies, select and articulate the best strategy of the lot, and march on to new heights of organisational effectiveness.

More often than not, goals are discovered and inferred from directions which organisations take. The directions themselves are typically grass root reactions to the stresses and strains or organisational life as individuals seek to maintain and extend their culture.

Perhaps most difficult to accept is that the principle of instrumental action, based on the belief that a direct link exists between what administrators do and significant organisational outcomes may be no more than leadership mythology retold by and to administrators to maintain their sanity and self-concepts. The evidence we have on the validity of

instrumental action is quite the contrary to accepted thought. Those who have actually studied what administrators do recount a different tale - a tale of administrative work characterised by mundane and routine activity difficult to match with significant organisational outcomes. (Crowson et.al., 1980;Mintzberg 1973,;Willis, 1980).

When one reads such descriptions of administrative action, it is very easy to conclude that leadership is a commodity in short supply these days and may be more an aspiration than reality. But I would suggest, that the problem of identifying and accounting for leadership rests not with whether it exists or not but with our limited view of the concept - with our concern for its mechanical features such as:

Leadership Behavior

Leadership Objectives

Leadership Outcomes

Measurable Leadership Effectiveness

We are too concerned with what leaders do, with charting their activities, with measuring their behavior and with assessing their effectiveness as determined by tangible accomplishments. We are, in essence, too concerned with leadership facts rather than leadership meanings.

Concern for leadership facts provides a "thin" view of the concept--one more concerned with the behavioral indicators of leadership than with artifacts of leadership; with providing crisp descriptions of leadership events and activities over a broad slice of organisational reality than with an indepth sensitive view of smaller and perhaps more meaningful segments.

This latter view might be referred to as "thick" (Geertz,1973). Thick description involves understanding the cultural significance of action and it involves interpretation. Recording actual leadership events and standards may well be less important than interpreting their meaning to administrators, teachers and students. The currency of interpretation and meaning are in the understanding, nurturing and changing of the school's culture.

Sensitive leaders have a nose for change; they sense the direction of the group and manage to get in front in time. This art is more than merely being clever, more than mere random activity, and more than stark opportunism characterised by one who wishes to lead at any costs and thus the direction of leadership is not relevant. With proper maintenance of the group's culture, proper nurturance and building of group norms, ideals, and commitments, the leader has confidence that the group will move in a desirable direction or will choose to hold its ground for good reasons. The substance of leadership, therefore, deals less with the overt leadership facts of direction, strategy, appropriate behavior and indicators of effectiveness and more with the social meanings implicit in the group's culture. In this sense, leadership has a symbolic quality particularly when the leader seeks to alter aspects of this culture.

What are the principles of action associated with my caricature of "symbolic" leadership? I would suggest three:

Leadership Selectivity

Leadership Consciousness

Leadership Fidelity

Leadership selectivity refers to the management of attention. No one would dispute the claim that time is a scarce resource in the sense that any future allocation of time is diminished by the time allocated to present activities. Increases of time spent on one activity result in neglect of other activities. The nature and effects of resource (time) scarcity is a concept well grounded in economics. Further, no one would dispute the claim that much of the freedom to choose how one spends time in administration is severely restrained by forces beyond the administrator's control. But I do not believe that a dramatic shift in time allocation is either possible or necessary in order to practice leadership selectivity. Administrators have at least three strategies available to them in dealing with the demands they face on their time:

1. Delegate issues to others even though if time was unlimited the administrator could deal with the issues better than anyone else.
2. Deal personally with issues but in a marginal way thus accepting a high degree of superficiality in administrative work.
3. Give special attention to certain issues considered most important.

For the most part administrators have a tendency to overestimate the number of issues which should be placed in the third category. It is likely that most of one's effectiveness

results from only a few of the activities in which one engages. By treating all activities the same, the vital-few activities are slighted and the trivial many get administrative attention beyond their worth in the school.

Why is leadership selectivity so important? Does it really matter for example, if an administrator is able to spend a little more time on a few important things and thus neglect some things that are less important? Probably not so much in an economic or management sense but probably a great deal in a psychological sense. Symbolically, how an administrator uses time is a form of administrative attention which communicates meanings to others in the school. It is assumed by most in the school that an administrator gives attention to the events and activities he or she values. As others learn the value of this activity to the administrator, they are also likely to give it attention. Administrative attention, then, can be considered as a form of modelling for others who work in the school. Through administrative attention, the administrator contributes to setting the tone or climate of the school and communicates to others the goals and activities which should enjoy high priority.

The social-psychological effects of administrative attention tend to occur whether or not they are intended. A primary school principal might, for example, espouse an educational platform which suggests a deep commitment to building a strong educational program sensitive to individual needs of students, taught by happy committed faculty, and supported by his or her school community. But this platform is likely to be ignored in favor of the one which students,

teachers and parents infer on the basis of administrative attention. Protestations to the contrary, if most of his or her time is spent on the trivial activities associated with routine administrative maintenance, observers will learn that "running a smooth ship" is the goal of real value to the principal and school.

Leadership consciousness refers to the espousing and modelling of principles, purposes, moral standards and organisational beliefs by the leader. It is the symbolic aspects of leadership to which I speak; the development and maintenance of a sense of purpose, the evoking of the imagination and the stirring of conscience. Leadership consciousness is reflected in the leader's ability to make the work of others meaningful, to give others a sense of understanding and appreciation for what they are doing. The leader seeks not to change behavior per se or to articulate a particular style while intent on achieving some measure of output effectiveness, but seeks instead to kindle in others greater meaning and understanding. Maintaining faith and commitment of the work group, to the organisation and its work, and managing the ways in which sentiments and beliefs, norms and expectations fit into the general and social order of the organisation is the essence of leadership consciousness. Defining and articulating the key cultural strands which, once accepted, determine the way of life in a particular department or school is the key to leadership consciousness. How people act, think and behave is a resultant of their belief and commitment to cultural norms, but the focus of leadership is on the cultural antecedents and not the behavior itself.

Leadership fidelity refers to the building of loyalty and devotion to organisational norms and work group aspirations. It seeks to make believers out of teachers, to add a measure of zeal to teacher activity and to enlist teachers as patriots who are loyal to an important cause as opposed to workers who give a mere fair day's work for a fair day's pay. In some respects leadership fidelity is the institutionalisation of leadership consciousness.

Through leadership fidelity the leaders seek a closer match between organisational activity and organisational values, between what teachers do day by day and the ideals held for the school. Recognising that a direct link does not exist between leadership behavior in its mechanical sense and organisational effectiveness, the leader seeks instead to rally the group to a set of ideals; to inculcate a way of life in the department or school; and to build loyalty and identity among teachers to this way of life. If successful, then when that leader with a nose for change jumps in front of the group, he or she may not be sure of the exact destination but will be sure that whatever the destination it will be a happy one.

In sum, schools and departments within schools create meanings and symbols which reflect these meanings, both of which become a part of the group's culture. This culture is a normative compliance tool which governs individual behavior. Teachers who honor these myths and realities as aspects of the group's culture are being patriotic to the school or department. Schools, for example, which are thought

of as progressive, flexible, and open, view teachers who espouse these virtues in word and deed as being more patriotic than teachers who do not.

Organisational patriotism, therefore, can be defined as commitment and loyalty to the characteristics which give a school or a school department its unique meaning. This meaning is part of the school's culture and implicit in its governing platforms. Goals, sense of mission, philosophy, excepted ways of operating, and images are examples of such characteristics. The more explicit these are and the more patriotic are members, the more likely that school interests and self interests of teachers will be matched.

Some have argued that most aspects of the school's culture are unrealistic and unattainable. Indeed the word symbol suggests that aspirations and beliefs may be more shadow than real. Should this matter? Probably not. What is important is that the group's cultural imperatives represent a common rallying cry and provide a standard to which the group strives.

Perhaps one way to compare the more instrumental and behavioral aspects of leadership with the symbolic is to differentiate between leadership needed to maintain an acceptable level of competence and leadership associated with going beyond routine competence to excellence. Despite the obvious importance of sound leadership skills and the maintenance of routine competence, too much attention is given to this feature and accordingly, leaders have not been found to be very significant in a qualitative sense. The

true value of leadership, I suggest, will be found in study and attention to the symbolic aspects. This is the knowledge which great leaders possess but ordinary ones do not.

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